

Message Text

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E.O. 11652: N/A

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCES PLANS FOR VOLUNTEER ARMED FORCES

REF: BRUSSELS A-109 AND 3635

1. SUMMARY: PRIME MINISTER LEBURTON HAS ANNOUNCED GOVERNMENT APPROVAL OF APLAN TO GRADUALLY TURN OVER OPERATIONAL MILITARY TASKS TO AN ENLARGED VOLUNTEER SEGMENT OF THE ARMED FORCES, LEAVING SUPPORT AND INTERIOR DEFENSE TASKS TO CONSCRIPTS WHOSE TERMS OF SERVICE WILL BE PROGRESSIVELY REDUCED TO SIX MONTHS IN FIVE YEARS' TIME. BELGIUM INTENDS TO HONOR ALL NATO COMMITMENTS AND CONSULT ALLIES ON PROPOSED REFORM. EARLIER PROPOSALS TO ELIMINATE DEFERMENTS AND LIMIT SERVICE TO ONE UNCLASSIFIED

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MEMBER PER FAMILY HAVE BEEN ABANDONED. THE NEW PLAN

REPORTEDLY HAS SUPPORT OF ALL COALITION PARTIES INCLUDING THE SOCIALISTS, WHO RECENTLY ADVANCED A SIMILAR SCHEME.
END SUMMARY.

2. FOLLOWING MEETINGS OF THE MINISTERIAL DEFENSE COMMITTEE (SEP 7) AND THE FULL COUNCIL OF MINISTERS (SEP 19), PRIME MINISTER LEBURTON ANNOUNCED THAT A NEW DEFENSE REFORM PROGRAM PROPOSED BY MINISTER OF NATIONAL DEFENSE VANDEN BOEYNANTS HAS BEEN APPROVED BY THE GOVERNMENT. AS REPORTED IN THE PRESS, THE PLANNED REFORM WOULD DIVIDE THE ARMED FORCES INTO TWO BASIC COMPONENTS: A PROFESSIONAL, WELL-TRAINED FORCE OF SHORT-TERM (TWO TO NINE YEARS) SPECIALIZED VOLUNTEERS PERFORMING MOST OF THE OPERATIONAL TASKS RELATED TO BELGIUM'S NATO COMMITMENTS, PRINCIPALLY IN GERMANY; AND A FORCE OF CONSCRIPTS WITH PROGRESIVELY SHORTER TERMS OF SERVICE ENGAGED IN DEFENSE OF THE INTERIOR, SUPPORT OF THE PROFESSIONAL UNITS AND CERTAIN CIVIC ACTION PROGRAMS. AS ENVISAGED, THE CHANGE WOULD TAKE PLACE OVER A PERIOD OF FIVE YEARS, DURING WHICH THE VOLUNTEER FORCE WOULD BE BUILT UP AT A RATE OF FIVE TO SIX THOUSAND MEN ANNUALLY AND THE TERM OF CONSCRIPT SERVICE REDUCED IN INCREMENTS TO A PERIOD OF SIX MONTHS, TO BE ACHIEVED IN 1978. THE CONSCRIPTS ARE TO BE TRAINED BY THE PROFESSIONALS AND, TO THE GREATEST EXTENT POSSIBLE, GIVEN JOBS RELATED TO THEIR CIVILIAN EDUCATION AND CAREERS. THE GOVERNMENT IS SAID TO FORESEE AN ANNUAL COST OF "LESS THAN ONE BILLION FRANCS" DURING THE FIVE-YEAR TRANSITION PERIOD.

3. LEBURTON'S ANNOUNCEMENT PROMINENTLY FEATURED AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF BELGIUM'S INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS IN THE NATO FRAMEWORK, AND HE STATED AN INTENTION TO CONSULT WITH ALLIES PRIOR TO SUBMISSION OF THE DRAFT PLAN TO PARLIAMENT (IN A SEPTEMBER 10 SPEECH TO THE ATLANTIC TREATY ASSOCIATION, REPORTED SEPARATELY, LEBURTON SAID THAT THE GOVERNMENT IS RECONSIDERING THE QUESTION OF OBLIGATORY MILITARY SERVICE AND WOULD CONSULT WITH ALLIES. HE ALSO SPOKE AT LENGTH ON BELGIUM'S DEPENDENCE ON AND CONTINUING COMMITMENT TO NATO.)

4. THE NEW PLAN MAKES NO MENTION OF EITHER THE ELIMINATION OF DEFERMENT CATEGORIES OR THE LIMITATION OF MILITARY SERVICE TO ONE MEMBER PER FAMILY. (AS REPORTED IN EMBASSY A-109, UNCLASSIFIED

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VANDEN BOEYNANT'S EARLIER ATTEMPTS TO ELIMINATE DEFERMENTS AS COMPENSATION FOR REDUCED TERMS OF SERVICE WERE STYMIED FOLLOWING MANIFESTATIONS OF WIDE-SPREAD OPPOSITION.)

5. BY WAY OF DEMONSTRATING THAT THE PLAN HAS THE SUPPORT OF ALL COALITION PARTIES, THE ANNOUNCEMENT NOTED THAT VANDEN BOEYNANTS (SOCIAL CHRISTIAN) HAD TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT THE VIEWS OF OTHER LEADING POLITICAL FIGURES, INCLUDING LIBERAL PARTY

PRESIDENT DESCAMPS AND SOCIALIST MINISTER FOR BRUSSELS AFFAIRS
CUDELL (WHO IS THE LEADING SOCIALIST THINKER ON DEFENSE MATTERS).
EDITORIAL IN "LA LIBRE BELGIQUE" (CONSERVATIVE CATHOLIC) OF
SEPTEMBER 10, WHILE NOTING THAT THE EARLIER VANDEN BOEYNANTS
PROPOSALS ENTAILED LESS EXPENSE, COMMENTS FAVORABLY ON THE
NEW PLAN.

6. COMMENT: AS WAS THE CASE WITH VANDEN BOEYNANTS'
REDUCTION/DEFERMENT SCHEME, MUCH OF THE NEW PLAN CLEARLY
DRAWS ON SOCIALIST VIEWS (BRUSSELS 3635). WHILE THE PLAN
CONTAINS NO OBVIOUS POINTS OF CONTENTION (SUCH AS THE DEFERMENT
PROBLEM), A VOLUNTEER FORCE COULD CONCEIVABLY INTERFERE
WITH EFFORTS TO BRING ABOUT A BALANCE BETWEEN FLEMISH AND WALLON
MILITARY COMPONENTS AND ONCE AGAIN BRING THE LINGUISTIC ISSUE TO
THE FORE.
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